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ABSTRACT

To address concerns over teacher shortages, many states have begun to turn to alternative certification programs. Today, 115 programs exist in over 40 states, and more than 250 colleges and universities are currently involved in some type of alternative preparation. This policy brief examines what alternative certification is, discusses different approaches taken by different states to ensure quality, and looks at the types of candidates who apply to alternative certification programs (e.g., second career seekers, recent college graduates who decide they want to become teachers, and groups that are underrepresented in the classroom such as minorities and male elementary teachers). It also presents guidelines for school districts (program design and delivery, teacher recruitment and selection, assessing teacher qualifications and knowledge, quality assurance through the trial period, and responsibility for teacher preparation and evaluation standards). The final two sections focus on issues relevant to state policymakers and public accountability. A sidebar presents guidelines for alternative teacher certification programs. (Contains 16 references.) (SM)

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MID-CONTINENT RESEARCH FOR EDUCATION AND LEARNING

Policy Brief

McREL
October 2000

Ensuring Quality Teachers Through Alternative Certification Programs

by Carol Ruckel

A serious teacher shortage looms for many schools across the nation, as student enrollments swell and an increasing number of teachers retire or leave the field. It is estimated that in the next decade, American school districts will need to hire 2.2 million new teachers (220,000 a year) into a profession that now totals 2.7 million (Feistritzer, 1999). Even if these projections are overstated, the gap between teacher supply and demand remains critical for certain subject areas and in certain regions of the nation (Hirsch, Koppich, & Knapp, 1999).

To address this concern, a growing number of states have begun to turn to alternative certification programs, also known as licensure programs. Today, 115 alternative programs exist in over 40 states (Feistritzer, 2000). In addition, more than 250 colleges and universities are currently involved in some type of alternative teacher preparation (Basinger, 2000).

Market forces also have played an important role in the development of alternative certification programs. For example, military cutbacks following the Gulf War led to the Troops to Teachers program, providing new candidates to ease the teacher shortage. Former military personnel are considered particularly fit for employment in our nation's urban schools, where teacher recruitment and retention have proved especially challenging.

In all, the National Center for Education Information estimates that 75,000 people have been certified through alternative certification programs (Hirsch & Samuelsen, 2000). Feistritzer (2000) claims that this number is 125,000, with 24,000 teachers certified through alternative routes in 1998-99 alone.

GUIDELINES FOR ALTERNATIVE CERTIFICATION POLICY

1. Know your teacher candidates.
2. Shape policy with research-based information where possible.
3. Match hiring policies with community expectations and district goals.
4. Create clear standards for alternative preparations.
5. Invest in evaluation and continuous improvement.

With increasing reliance on alternative teacher certification to rebuild the teaching workforce, it has become more critical than ever to examine how school districts and state policymakers can ensure that nontraditional programs produce quality teachers.

What is alternative certification?

Regular teacher certification refers to public school teaching credentials acquired by completing a state-approved program at an institution of higher learning. The terms "alternative certification" and "alternative licensure," on the other hand, apply to a variety of nonstandard options for obtaining the state credentials required to teach in public schools. Some alternative programs are essentially night schools that deliver traditional teacher education programs for working adults. Others are college-based programs that provide coursework to complement on-the-job learning for teachers hired with emergency certificates. Still others are "fast-track" programs designed to move prospective teachers through the basic curriculum more quickly, by allowing theory courses to be taken later as part of a professional development program.

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Alternative program requirements are generally subject to the same policy and regulation trends as traditional, college-based programs: in periods of lesser regulation for traditional teacher education, alternative programs have been more flexible. For example, during the 1970s and 1980s, Colorado college graduates could receive alternative certification after three years' classroom experience with favorable evaluations. However, when education came under more criticism in the 1980s, Colorado strengthened and codified its requirements for alternative certification programs by specifying training, hours, and testing requirements. This led to closer scrutiny of teacher candidates' content preparation and the establishment of state requirements for instruction in teaching methods.

While policymakers around the country are concerned about the quality and supply of teachers, consensus as to how states can best ensure quality is elusive.

Ensuring quality — different states, different approaches

While policymakers around the country are concerned about the quality and supply of teachers, consensus as to how states can best ensure quality is elusive.

In New Mexico, for example, the legislature has adopted a new alternative licensing program for candidates who have four-year degrees. An individual completes a 12-hour block of coursework delivered by an institution of higher education, passes the state licensing test, and is granted a three-year alternative license. A candidate who has prior teaching experience in a private school or at a different grade level may substitute a portfolio for the 12 hours of coursework. Teachers are mentored during their initial three-year license period.

At the same time, New Mexico is *eliminating* waivers to the state's required licensure examination. The New Mexico State Board of Education has issued a statement that it "believes that all applicants for licensure must pass the New Mexico Teacher Assessments and that institutions of higher education must assume a greater role in ensuring that teachers prepared at New Mexico colleges and universities have the skills and knowledge to pass the assessments" (New Mexico State Board of Education, 2000).

Pennsylvania is entering the ranks of states with alternative licensing programs through the Governor's Teachers for the 21st Century Initiative. The program is designed to provide teachers for critical vacancies. Those seeking alternative certification must join with a public school and a teacher preparation program to design an individually prescribed plan for state approval (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 1999). However, three months after the program was announced, the Pennsylvania State Education Association and Association of Colleges and Teacher Educators sued to quash it, claiming that state officials did not have the authority to create such a program (Johnston, 1999). As of this publication, the lawsuit is still pending.

In Colorado, a formalized alternative licensing program has existed for almost 10 years. Initially, it required program approval by the Department of Education and specified that participants meet subject area preparation and state testing requirements. In 1999, the legislature, as part of a package of teacher education reforms, created a Teacher in Residence Program. Although this program must be implemented in collaboration with a college, the district assesses the teacher's qualifications and recommends the teacher for licensure. A resident teacher who holds a four-year college degree and meets the same performance standards as a traditionally trained teacher may teach for two years on a temporary license (Hirsch & Samuelsen, 2000).

Entry into the Arkansas alternative program includes grade point average requirements, a college major in the subject to be taught, references, an interview, and two entry exams. An alternative route in Michigan requires either

a bachelor's degree or current enrollment in a traditional program and completion of 90 semester hours of teacher preparation (Feistritzer, 2000). Alabama can issue a Special Alternative Certificate to an individual who has earned at least a bachelor's degree and has been admitted to an Alabama university (Wiitala, undated).

Across the board, alternative certification programs have similar content knowledge expectations of their teacher candidates but widely diverse pedagogical approaches. Some view teacher candidacy as an apprenticeship period, whereas others have more formal requirements. All seek, ultimately, to produce teachers of the highest possible quality, who meet standards comparable to those required of traditionally trained teachers.

The candidates

To create appropriate alternatives, policymakers must determine what kinds of individuals seek out these certification programs and to what extent they match the expectations for qualified candidates. These individuals generally fall into three categories. First are the second-career seekers — those who have retired, are casualties of corporate downsizing, are seeking a career change, or have discovered a yearning to teach. Most alternative programs are designed with this group in mind and assume that candidates come to teaching with strong content knowledge, whether from a college degree or career experience.

The second category of candidates to seek alternative programs is recent college graduates who have made a decision to enter teaching too late in their college programs to switch majors. The "late decision-makers" can usually fit into an alternative program designed for the second-career seekers. The final group of potential teachers is new graduates who have only completed part of a teacher education program. The "partly finished" candidates are only served by the most flexible programs.

Who, then, are the candidates *being recruited* for alternative programs? Human resources managers know the extra burden of training a teacher on the job and generally prefer hiring fully licensed teachers. The alternative candidates they seek, therefore, are those willing and able to take on difficult assignments or to teach in shortage content areas such as math, science, special education and programs for English language learners.

Alternative programs attract a significantly larger number of minority teachers than traditional college programs.

Sometimes personnel officers look for nontraditional candidates from groups underrepresented in the classroom, such as minorities and male elementary teachers. Alternative programs attract a significantly larger number of minority teachers than traditional college programs (Feistritzer, 1999). Kentucky's Teacher Opportunity Program (TOP) recruits minority candidates and provides scholarships, paid teaching assistantships, and guaranteed employment after program completion (Brennan & Bliss, 1998).

Guidelines for school districts

As alternative programs become increasingly popular, policymakers at the local level will have to address tough issues that blend policy and practice.

- **Design and delivery of preparation programs.** Are state laws and regulations prescriptive, or do they allow sufficient latitude for school districts or institutions of higher education to improve teacher preparation programs? Must school districts conduct their programs in cooperation with a college, or can they do so alone? If they must have a partner, what happens if they are unable to secure one?
- **Recruitment and selection of teachers.** Should the emphasis of a recruiting program be on finding trained teachers or alternative candidates — and what is the

balance? Should districts recognize alternatively certified teachers from other districts, and, if so, what are the criteria for placing them on the salary scale? As urban districts, in particular, try to recruit minority candidates, how should they deal with affirmative action issues aimed at producing racial balance in staffing?

Another critical component of teacher recruitment and selection is to match hiring policies and procedures with community expectations and district goals for student achievement.

- **Criteria for assessing teacher qualifications and content area knowledge.** Should a standardized test be required, or is a transcript review sufficient? How do work experiences equate to college coursework? Most states require that candidates for alternative certification pass the same tests as traditionally prepared teachers.
- **Quality assurance throughout the trial period.** Are checkpoints in place and interventions readily available should new teachers require assistance? How can parents be assured that placement in a classroom with a teacher-in-training does not disadvantage their children? Is there a statutory provision for dismissing teachers during the probationary period? The role of the principal as the on-site supervisor is critical to maintaining the credibility of alternative teacher certification programs.
- **Responsibility for teacher preparation and evaluation standards.** Which takes precedence — a district's performance and preparation expectations, or state standards? In a partnership program, does the district or the university have responsibility for determining a candidate's success? Should a school district's teacher evaluation system, designed to measure the performance of fully trained teachers, be used for the appraisal of what are essentially preservice teachers?

The answers to these questions may vary widely, depending on the individual needs of each school or district. However, there are general guidelines for determining the most effective solutions. First, it is important for policymakers to be well-grounded in the state laws governing teacher recruitment, certification, and hiring. Next, hiring policies should be shaped by research-based information whenever possible.

Another critical component of teacher recruitment and selection is to match hiring policies and procedures with community expectations and district goals for student achievement. "School districts need to determine exactly what they want teachers to do, and then design or locate a recruitment program that represents their needs," said Rich Laughlin, assistant professor in the Denver University Graduate School of Education and Educational Leadership and Policy Studies. Most importantly, he continued, "School districts must be able to assure themselves that the teachers they hire are capable of raising the level of student achievement."

Issues for state policymakers

Licensing teachers is a state function, whether handled by a department of education or a professional standards board. State level policymakers must consider the practice and policy issues outlined above, as well as potential legal issues.

State policy must be very clear about the standards to be used in any alternative certificate program — whether it be a night school program offered by a university or an individualized program for one or two candidates offered in a small school district. The state must be assured that teachers with alternative certification meet state certification standards and are prepared, like traditional teachers, to teach in any district in the state. If certification standards are performance-based, the performance measures used for teachers

licensed in alternative programs must be of comparable rigor to those used in higher education programs.

Leaders at the school, district, and state levels must work to ensure the credibility of alternative certification — both to educators and to the public.

Feistritzer (1999) outlines five components of effective alternative certification programs:

- strong academic coursework in the subject to be taught;
- field-based programs where learning takes place in actual classroom settings;
- candidates working with strong mentor teachers;
- group, not individual, training; and
- collaboration among state departments of education, higher education, and school districts in the planning and delivery of programs.

State policy must reinforce these effective practices. In a recent policy statement (1999), the Fordham Foundation advocates less regulation and stronger accountability in teacher certification and training. The result, it claims, would be a more diverse, better prepared teacher pool. Based on this assumption, the Foundation recommends four key state policies:

- States should develop results-based accountability systems for schools and teachers, as well as students.
- States should empower school-level administrators with the authority to make personnel decisions.
- States should enforce regulations that ensure teachers do no harm — e.g., conduct background checks, require bachelor of arts degrees in an academic field, etc.
- States should open more paths into the classroom, encourage diversity and choice in preservice training, and welcome into the profession a larger pool of talented and well-educated people who want to teach.

States should carefully consider these guidelines when adopting alternative certification policies. In addition, both the state and the district must examine specific issues related to parity between the alternative certification and the traditional tracks. Compensation, tenure, and employment and dismissal procedures are all likely to be controversial topics.

Public accountability

State policymakers are advised to recognize that alternative certification programs are often viewed as being in competition with, or of lesser quality than, traditional teacher education (Colorado Council of Deans of Education, 1999). Leaders at the school, district, and state levels must work to ensure the credibility of alternative certification — both to educators and to the public.

If states are to answer questions about the ability of alternative programs to produce quality teachers, they will have to be prepared to make the evaluation investment necessary...

An important component of establishing and maintaining credibility is to continually engage in evaluating the quality of alternatively prepared teachers. In her recent publication, *Teacher Quality and Student Achievement: A Review of State Policy Evidence*, Linda Darling-Hammond (1999) cites studies suggesting that teachers who begin work through very short alternative routes tend to have greater difficulties than those more fully prepared. These areas of difficulty include planning curriculum, managing the classroom, teaching, and diagnosing student learning needs. Darling-Hammond concludes that student

achievement is greater with teachers holding full certification and a college major in their teaching field than with teachers holding only teaching degrees.

If states are to answer questions about the ability of their alternative programs to produce quality teachers, they will have to be prepared to make the evaluation investment necessary to track alternative teacher performance over time and compare it in a valid and meaningful way with the performance of traditionally prepared teachers. They may also want to investigate the effect of alternative preparation programs on enrollment in traditional teacher training programs. Finally, it is important for policymakers to explore the implications of alternative preparation on teaching in a standards-based environment — will alternative programs provide the educational background necessary to teach in this era of standards and accountability?

As teacher shortages increase, states are likely to face increasing pressure to provide a variety of alternative certification programs. Policymakers must look very carefully at the breadth of issues that need to be addressed in making decisions about the preparation of the nation's teachers. They must meet the challenge of maintaining high certification standards while providing varied opportunities through which teachers can enter the profession.

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